
Multi-generational workforces: Creating a brighter future



Today's workplace is more age-diverse than ever before, with five generations working side by side - from experienced professionals delaying retirement to the emerging Generation Alpha (born from 2010 onwards).

This unprecedented mix brings fresh opportunities for innovation, learning and collaboration — alongside new challenges in integration, productivity and cohesion. However, the benefits from fresh thinking, different experiences and the diverse perspectives multi-generational workforces bring often outweigh these challenges.

That's why Totum, in partnership with LMA Europe, set out to explore multi-generational relationships in the workplace, what unites them, what sets them apart, and how firms can harness this diversity to thrive.

Our data takes in responses from professionals across a range of industries - including strong representation from law, consulting and wider professional services - to give firms an indication of how to thrive and build better relationships in a multi-generational environment.

Our survey segmented insights by age groups: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 44-54 and 55+, examining how different generations view career priorities, progression and workplace values.

Whilst some patterns are clear across age groups - career progression and alignment with company values are rated highly by all generations - there are other traits that become more or less important depending on the stage of working life an individual is in.

For example, younger professionals (18-34) are more likely to prioritise agile working and work/life balance, learning and development opportunities and mentorship. By contrast, professionals aged 45 and above are more likely to value transparent leadership, the opportunity to work how they want and networking.

These factors may seem unsurprising at first, but it's worth noting that managing these differing priorities is key to how firms retain, engage and build effective relationships with their people – and attract new talent when recruiting.

However, the overarching message is that generations want to work together to benefit themselves, their careers, and their companies.



"I believe multi-generational relationships are essential to a harmonious workplace."

25-34 year-old

This report has analysed the data and will present our findings through three key themes: generational priorities, career motivations, and relationship building.



Generational priorities

When it comes to the factors that generations value when choosing a new job, each age group has slightly different priorities.

For our youngest cohort, salary (100%), career progression (88%) and quality leadership (63%) are the top three priorities, with the option for increased responsibilities and promotion (50%) an outlier among other generations.

In the 25-34 bracket, salary (89%) and career progression (66%) remain priorities, but a clear focus on agile working and work/life balance (63%) is also desired.



Between 35-44, career progression begins to become less of a concern. Salary (85%) and quality leadership (55%) are important, but agile working and work/life balance continues to be a factor (58%). At this stage of working life, we begin to see a focus on company values (36%) grow in importance. Similar priorities remain in place as workers move into the 45-54 age group.

The 55+ age bracket is the only demographic where salary isn't the most important factor in a new job, perhaps because many here have reached their maximum earning potential. Company values (65%) and quality leadership (58%) become just as important as the right pay packet (58%) as this demographic looks for other qualities in a job.

So what does the data tell us? Salary will always be a decisive factor in choosing a new job, regardless of age group. However, alignment between personal and company values becomes ever more important as employees move through the age groups, with those at the end of their careers valuing it above all else. Conversely, despite being stereotyped as purpose-led and values-driven, just over a third (39%) of the combined 18-34-year-old grouping see company values as a motivating factor in choosing a new role.

One factor that all generations are looking for is a quality leader, with similar percentages across groups. However, we do see a slight growth in importance in mid to later career, with employees here perhaps more sensitive to organisational culture and management styles.



"Whilst older generations need to be sensitive and open to the needs of younger generations, it is important for younger generations not to dismiss the experience and wisdom of older generations."

55+ year-old

Figure one: What factors are most important to you when choosing a new job?

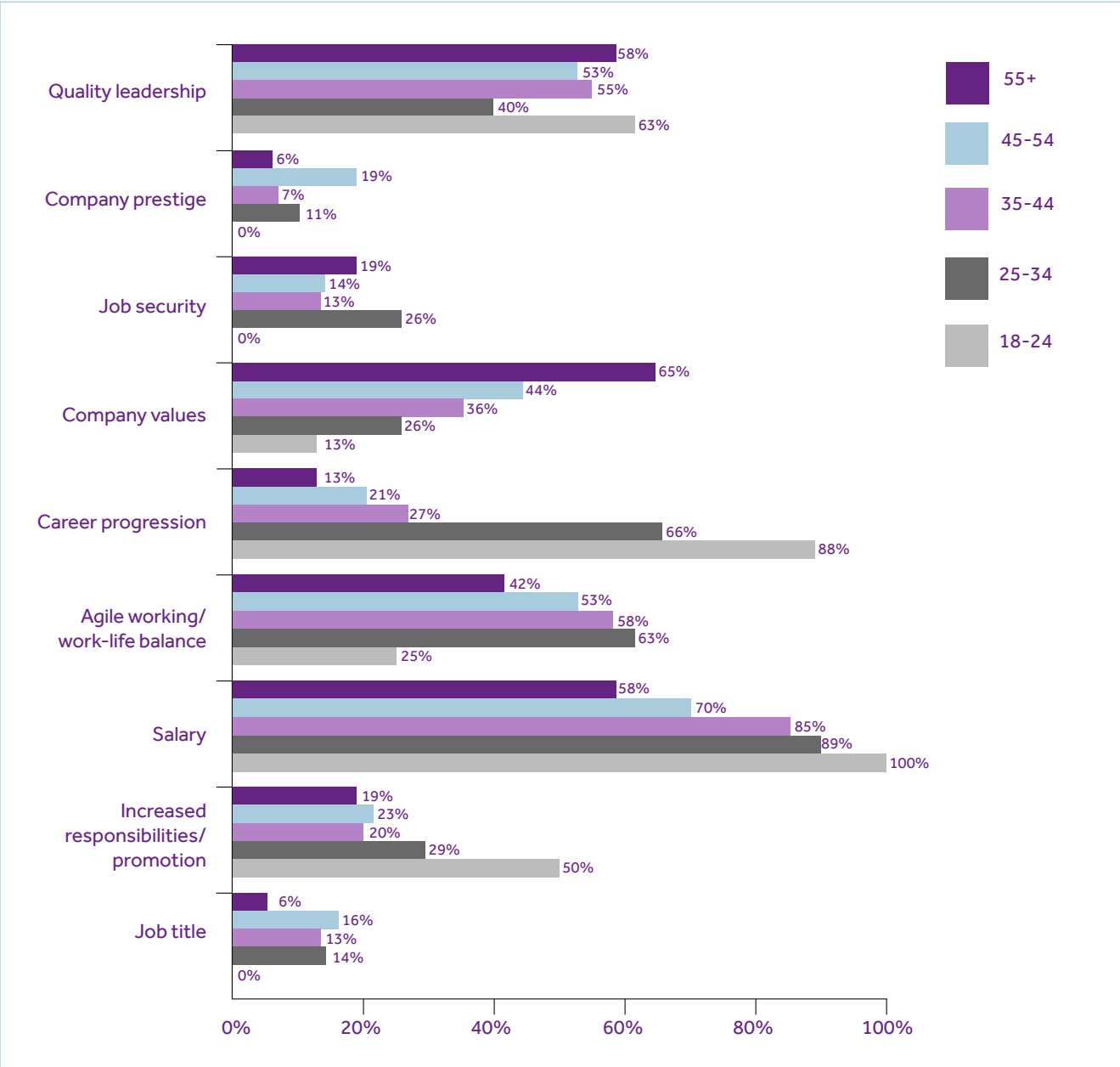
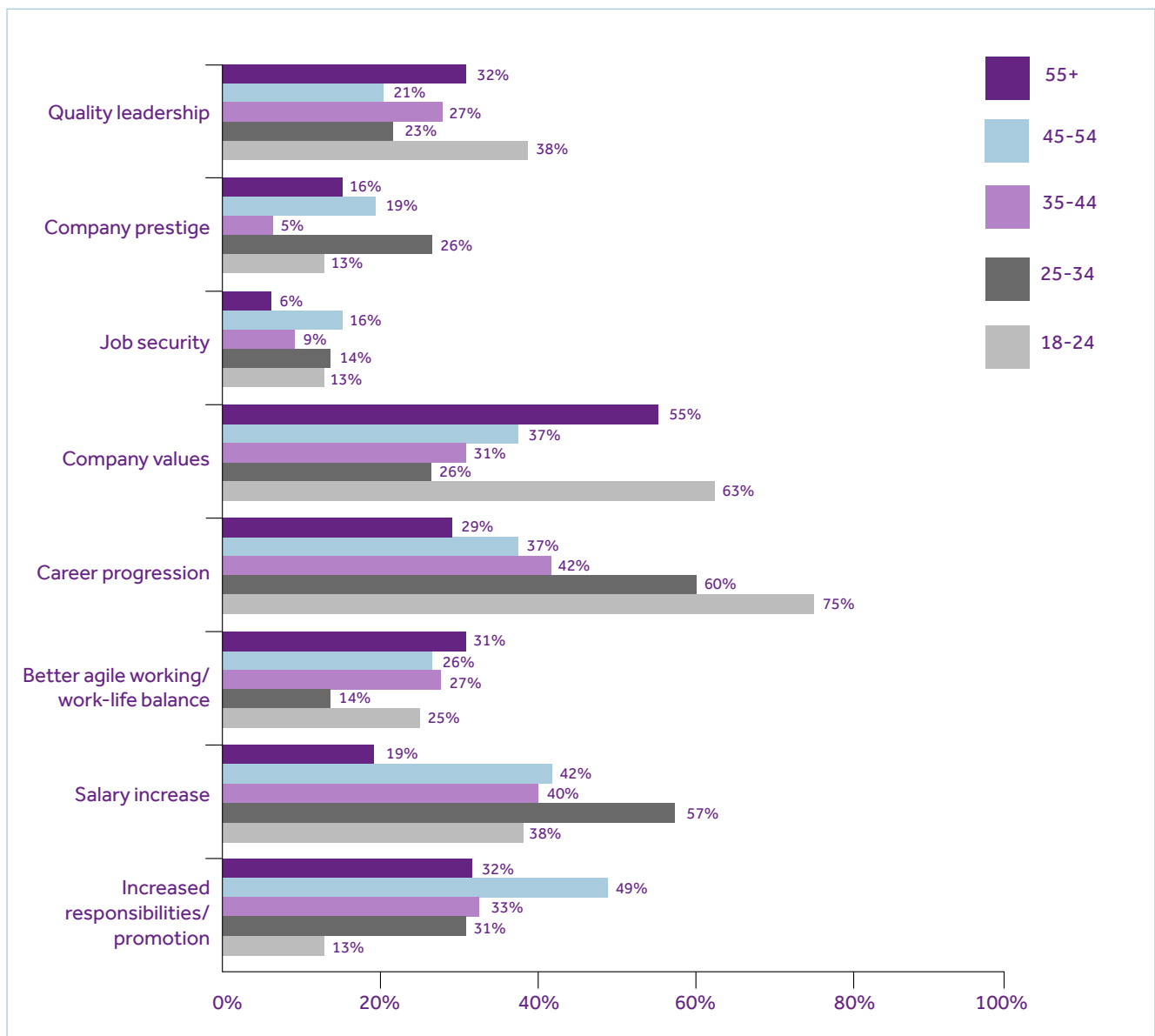


Figure two: Thinking of your current role, what was the main reason for choosing this role?



As with the question in figure one, participants were asked to choose their top three reasons. Whilst thoughts around leadership quality, career progression and company prestige largely correlate, it is interesting to note that 63% of 18–24-year-olds viewed company values as a differentiator in choosing their current role, but just 13% would value it in choosing a new job.

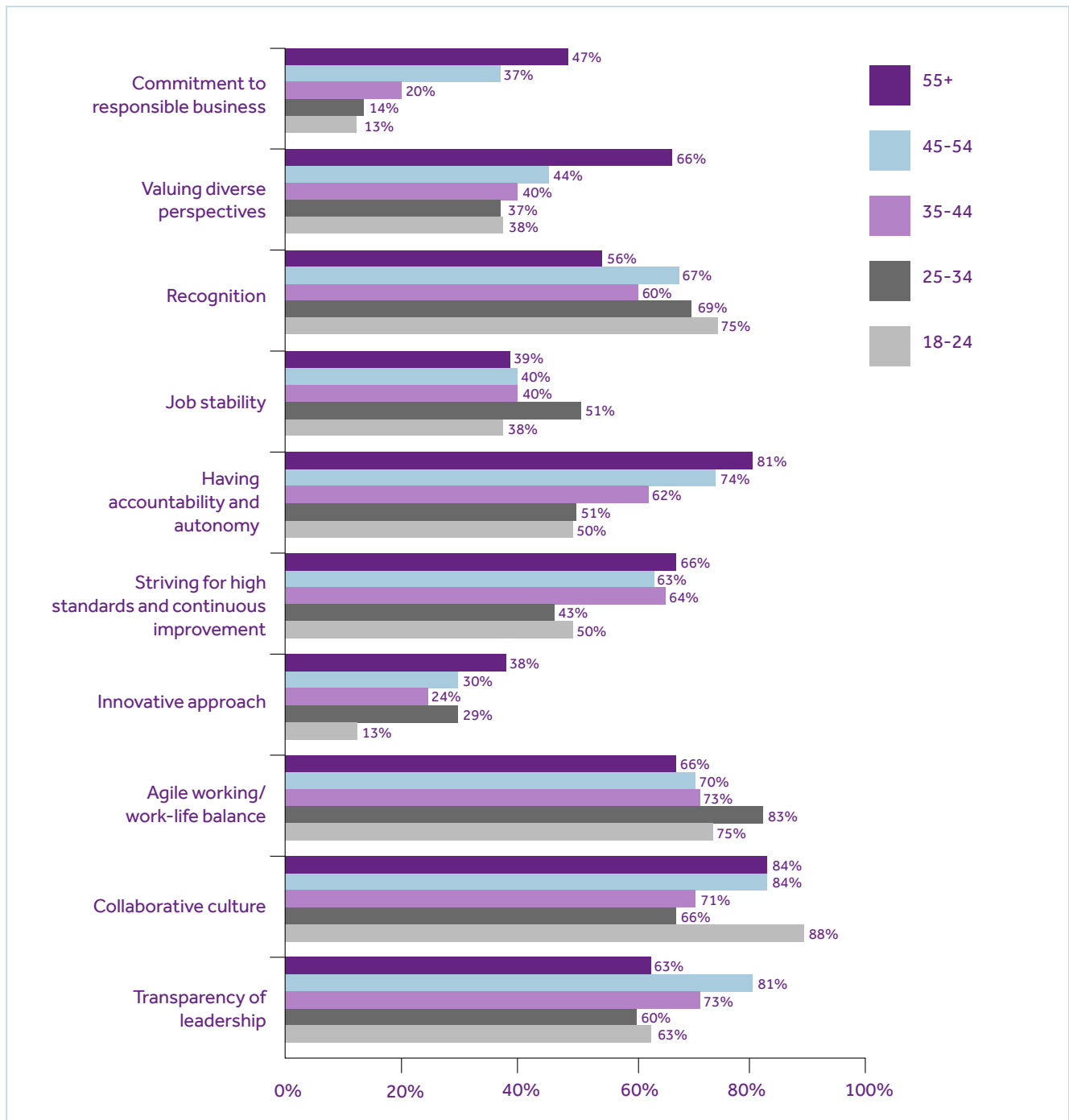
In addition, 55% of people over 55 see company values as the single most important factor in choosing their current role. This focus on company values by both our oldest and youngest cohorts provide firms with an opportunity to engage different generations on values, purpose and culture in a meaningful way that encourages collaboration.

Similarly, 42–63% of all generations (except 18–24) say agile working and work/life balance would be a motivating factor in choosing a new job, but between 14–31% say it was a factor in choosing their current job.

“Different generations often prefer different communication styles. It’s not about which method is ‘right’, but about learning to flex your approach to meet the moment and person.”

25-34 year-old

Figure three: What workplace values matter most to you?



“Age is only a number and our workforce is aging. We should stop putting people in buckets by age and turn to attitude and ability. 70 is the new 50.”

55+ year-old

Figure four: What workplace values matter most to you? (across all age groups)

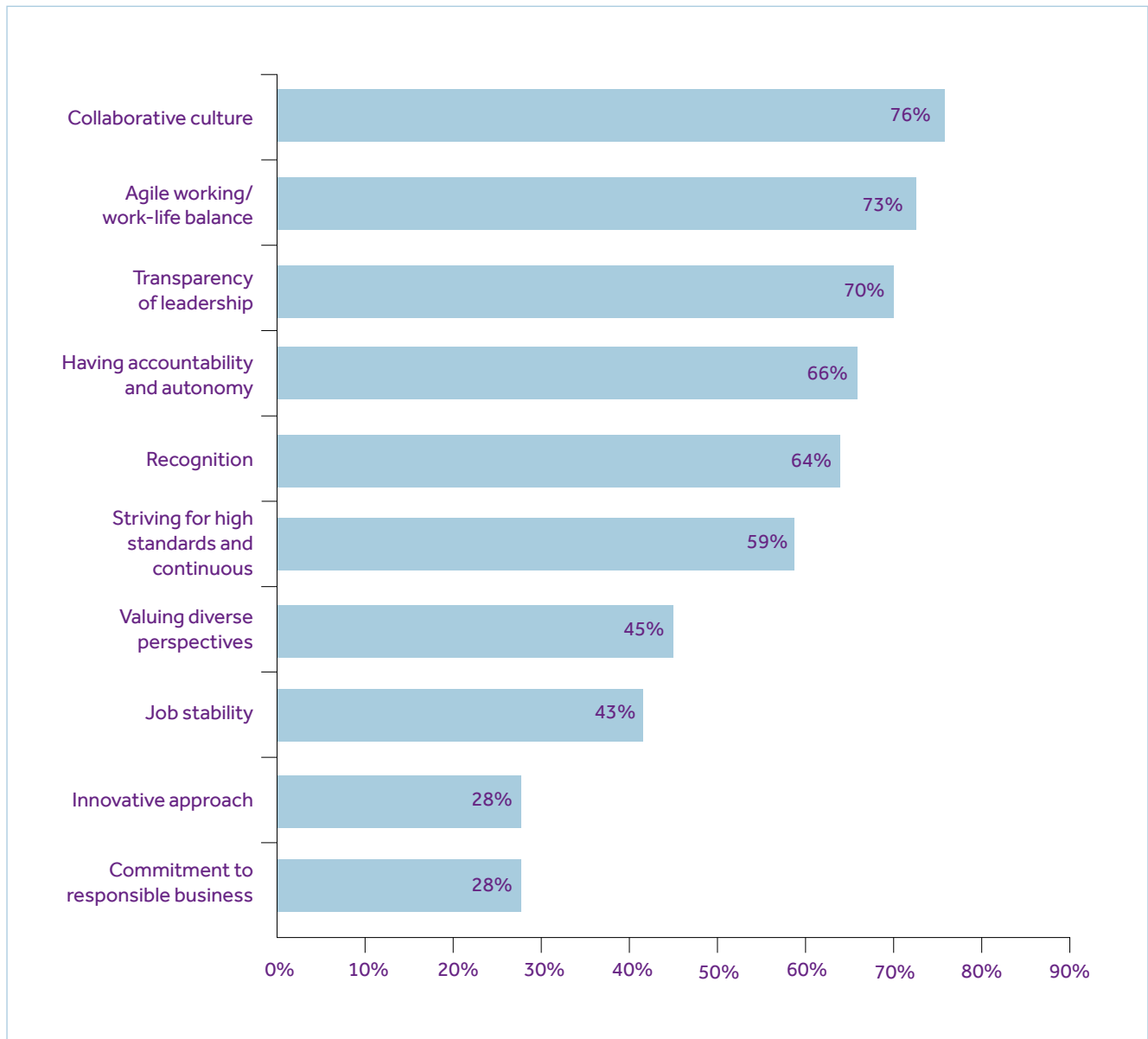


Figure four examines the workplace values that matter the most to respondents, with figure three splitting this by generation. While a collaborative culture and work/life balance remain the most important values to our cohort, it's a surprise to see job stability (43% across the board) score so lowly. While it is accepted that younger employees might seek to move on more frequently, perhaps the uncertain economy has eroded job security for other generations, with some experiencing or perceiving less reward for loyalty.

Another statistic that perhaps goes against the grain is who values diverse perspectives most. Here, it is the over 55s who rate this most highly at 66%, a full 22% higher than the next generation at 45-54.



Career motivations: What drives us?

From job-hopping to side hustles, portfolio careers to entrepreneurship, one thing that is changing is how people view their long-term careers.

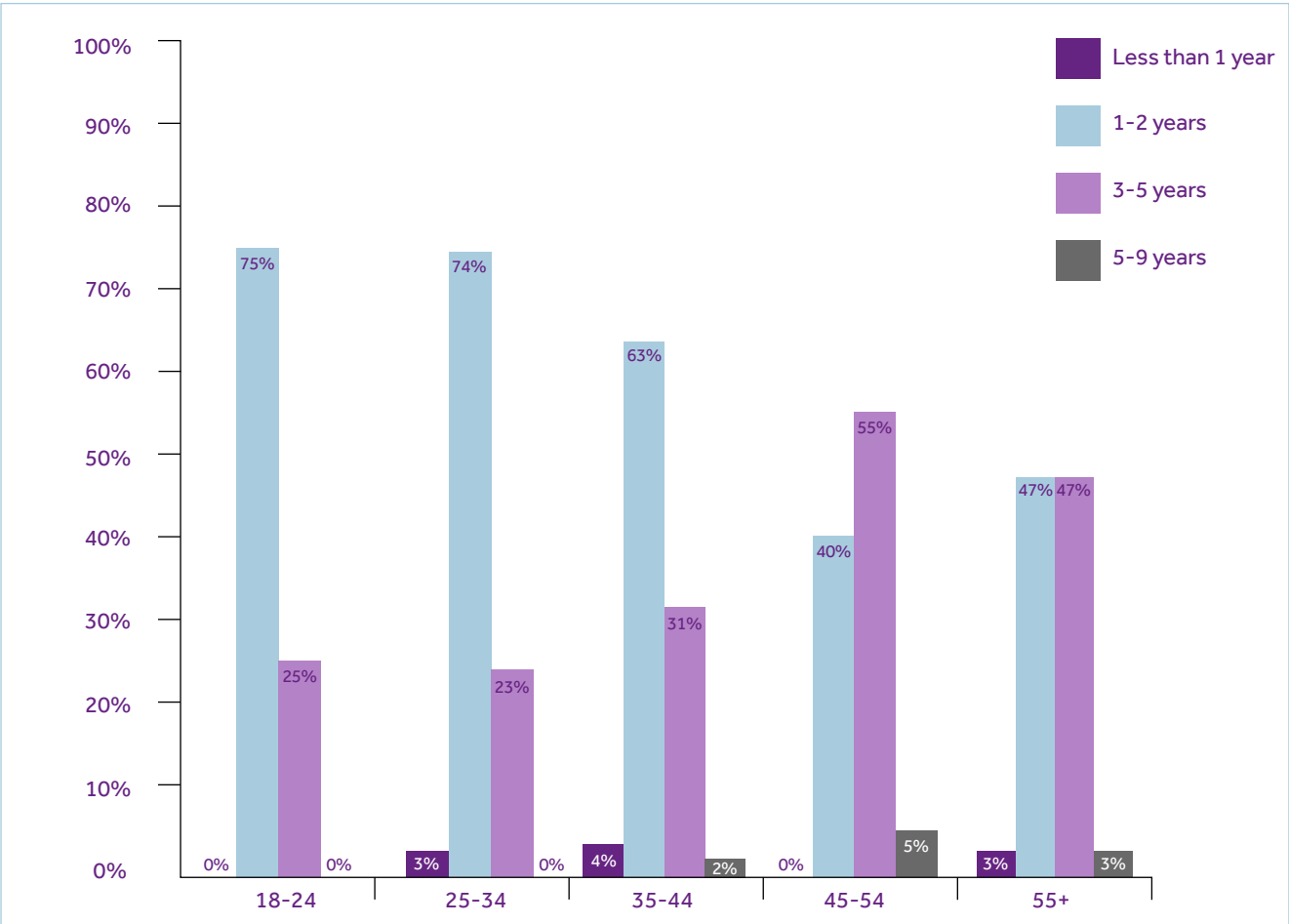
The age of a job for life seems long gone, but are there any differences in how generations view career progression?

One area of disagreement is the minimum time our generations believe it is acceptable to stay in one role. For 75% of those aged 18-24 and 74% of 25-34-year-olds, 1-2 years is deemed acceptable.

However, the older you get, the more this number diminishes until you reach the 45-54 category, where over half (55%) believe 3-5 years should be the minimum.

Interestingly, those aged 55+ are equally split between 1-2 years and 3-5 years, perhaps demonstrating a shorter-term approach to jobs as careers enter their latter stages.

Figure five: What do you think is the acceptable minimum amount of time to stay in one role?



“I have found it interesting discussing how my intergenerational team consume news and our sources. Our ways of staying commercially aware are very different.”

35-44 year-old



Another area of change is in critical skills for career advancement. Across the board, our respondents believe that 'softer' skills such as communication (64%), resilience (53%) and adaptability (50%) hold the key to future success, with only 28% choosing technical skills.

However, there are some interesting variations by generation. Even though technical skills score lowly for everyone, there is a sliding scale of importance - the older the respondent, the more important they deem technical expertise.

Our social media savvy 18-24-year-olds disproportionately view communication as the key career skill, while the experienced, work-hardened 55+ plus age group feel the same way about resilience.

Notably, networking is viewed as one of the lowest priority skills across all age groups, coming joint last with project management (although this is prized more highly by those in the 18-34 bracket).

Figure six: What skills have been most critical to your career advancement or, if this is your first main role, which skills do you anticipate being most critical?

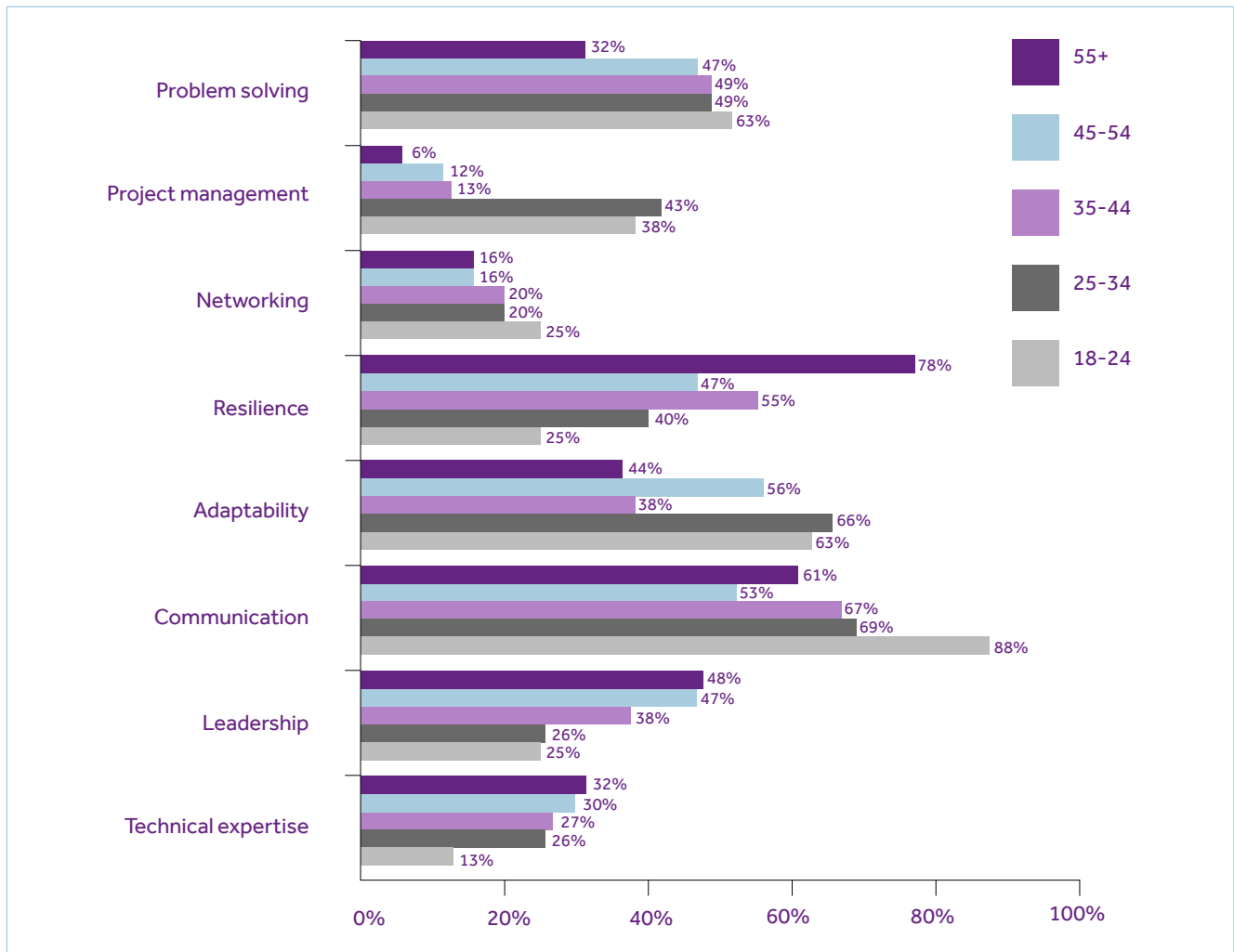
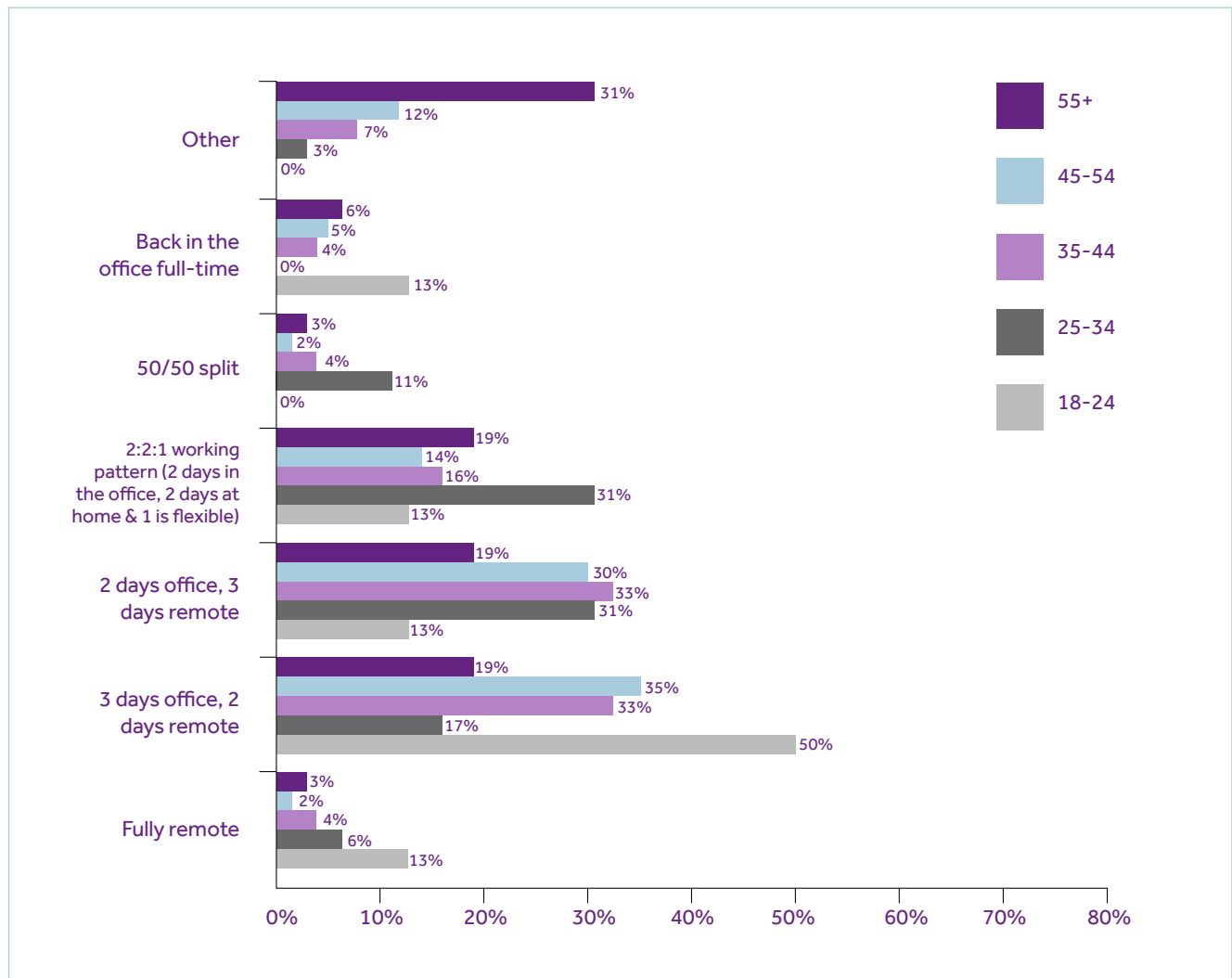


Figure seven: What is your ideal working arrangement?



Working arrangements have long been a source of contention for firms, and while many have nailed down hybrid working policies, others are pushing employees to spend more time in the office. So how do our generations view their ideal working pattern?

Essentially, all employees want some form of flexibility, whether that is three days in and two days remote, two days in and three days remote, or a 2:2:1 pattern.

Fewer than 6% of respondents want to work fully remotely or in the office full-time, although those that do (13%) are more likely to be in the 18-24 age group.

Not a single 25-34-year-old wanted to work in the office full-time, suggesting that work/life pressures are most acute for this age group. Conversely, 31% of the over 55 cohort ticked 'other'. Comments from respondents in this group included 'totally flexible' to 'whatever arrangement suits my work and personal life each week', suggesting that this cohort are more trusted to manage their own working patterns.

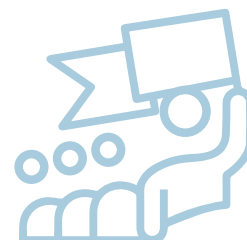
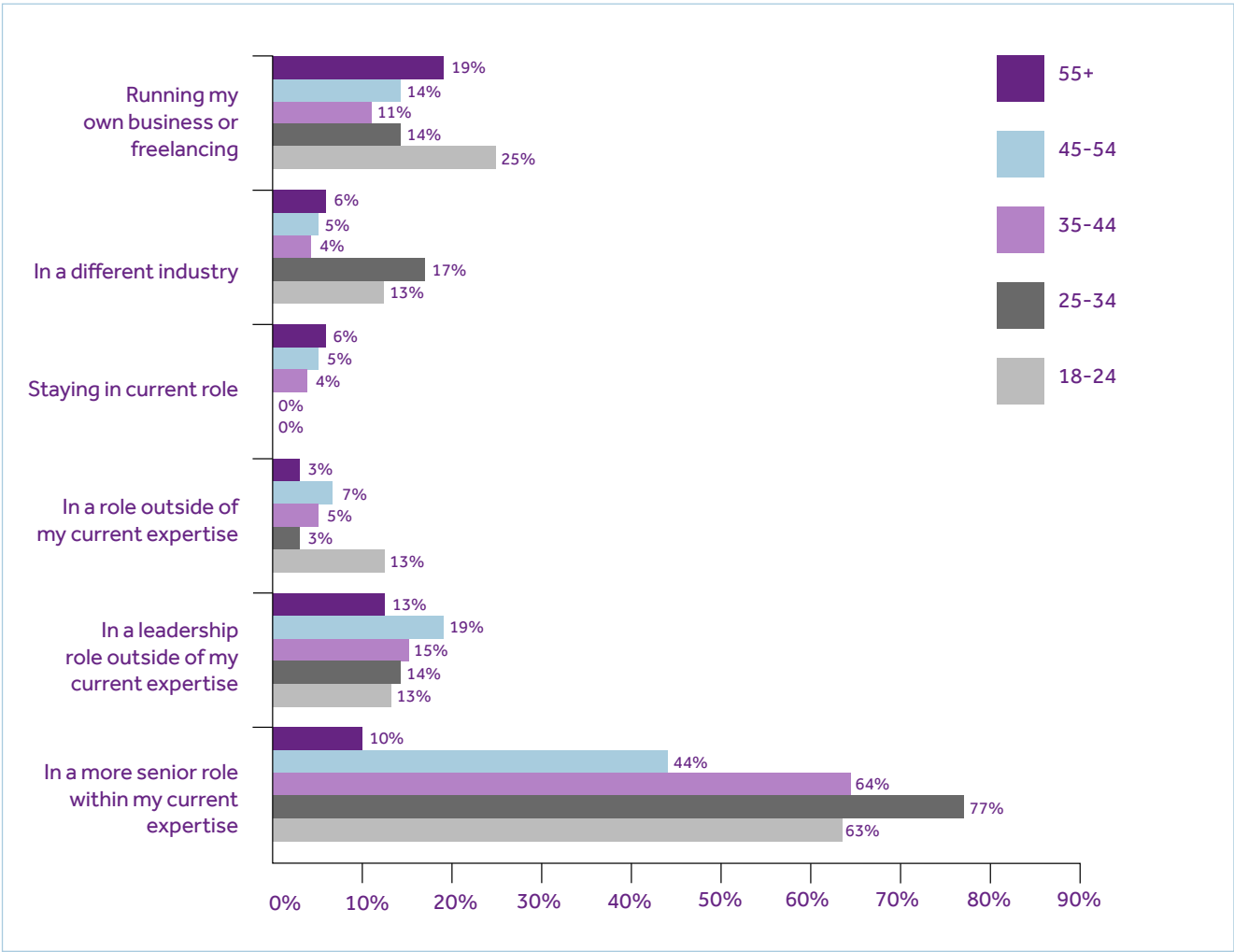


Figure eight: Where do you see your career 10 years from now?



Our final question around career motivations asked respondents ‘where do you see your career ten years from now?’. It comes as no surprise that most age groups, apart from 55+ year-olds, are expected to be in a more senior role within their current expertise, with those at the beginning to mid-point of their careers more likely to choose this option. However, in what could be a worrying trend for law firms, 13% of 18–24-year-olds and 17% of 25–34-year-olds see their future in a different industry.

The inverse of this is that perhaps more young people in other sectors might consider a move into law. With an ever-evolving need for different skills across all industries, it’s likely that people will move sectors, job roles and industries more frequently. This presents an opportunity for firms to recruit new talent with new expertise and experiences.

Given that we’re all expected to have longer careers and the world of work is changing rapidly, it’s interesting to note that all generations are open to moving both sectors and professions. Our survey saw a fairly even split among age groups in those considering a leadership role outside of their current expertise, while running a business or freelancing was also a popular option among respondents, particularly in the youngest age category.



Relationship building: How we connect

The key to effective intergenerational work is building trusting, mutually respectful relationships. But this often depends on how employees view their firm’s culture and the values its people represent.

Our survey looked at how different age groups viewed the importance of relationship building when it came to career development.

We started by asking how strongly they agreed with the statement ‘I believe that by collaborating on firm-wide projects or activities outside of my day job, I can enhance my career progression opportunities’.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority across age groups agreed that this had an impact.

“Finding the right way to connect may be difficult, but it is necessary. We are committed to building relationships with clients at all seniority levels, so why can’t we promote this internally?”
45-54 year-old

Figure nine: I believe that by collaborating on firm-wide projects or activities outside of my day job, I can enhance my career progression opportunities

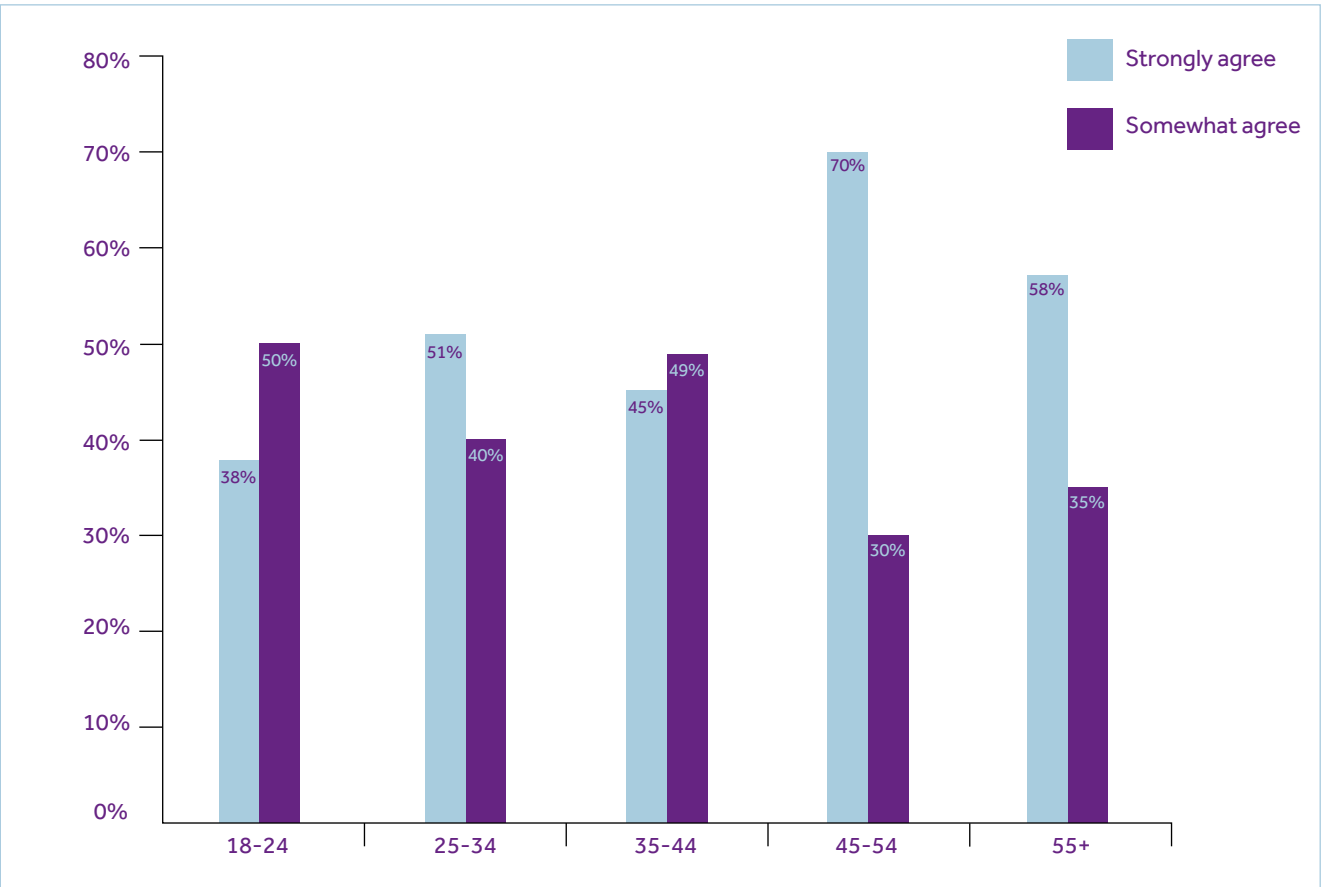
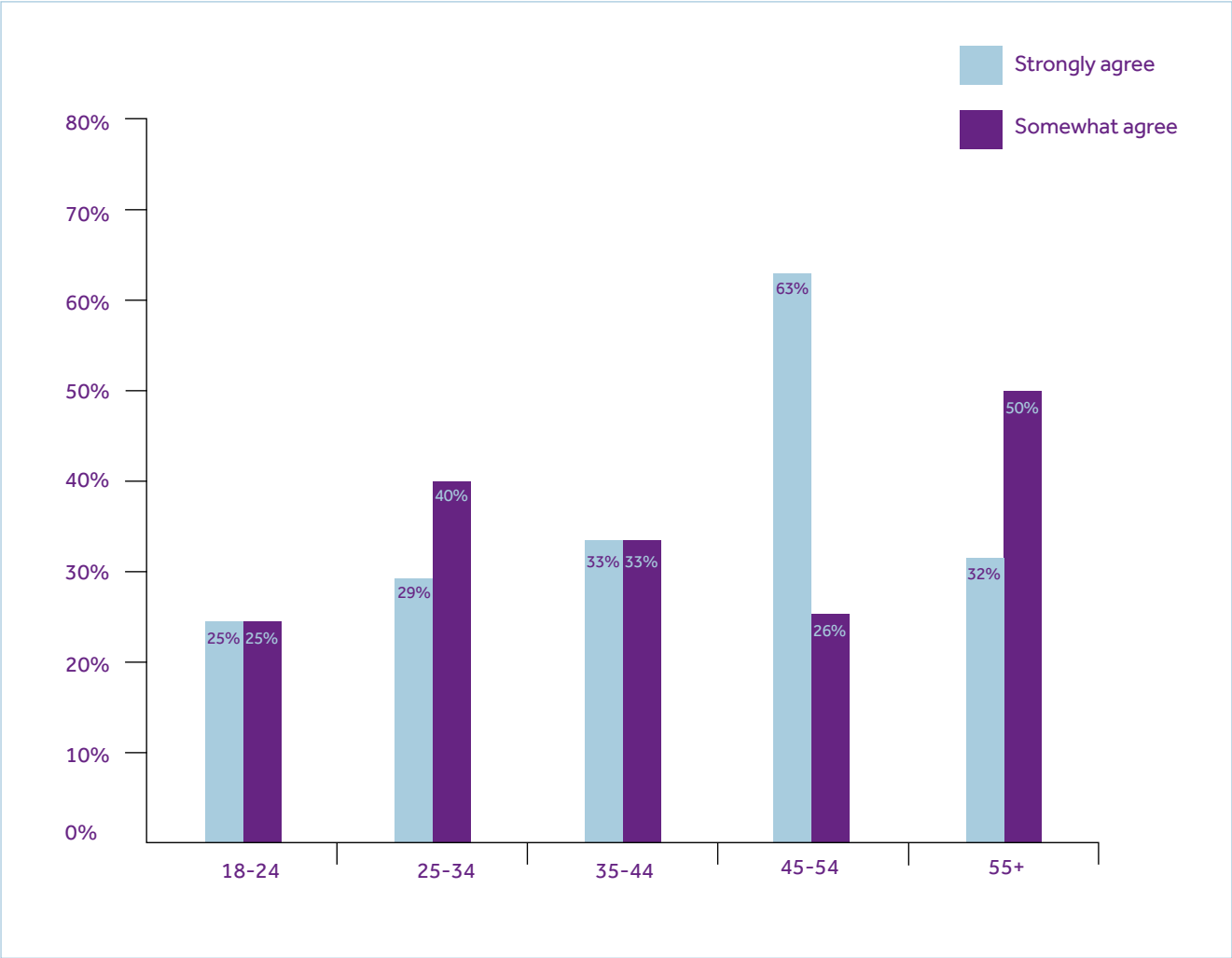


Figure ten: I believe having a professional network outside of my firm is essential for career success

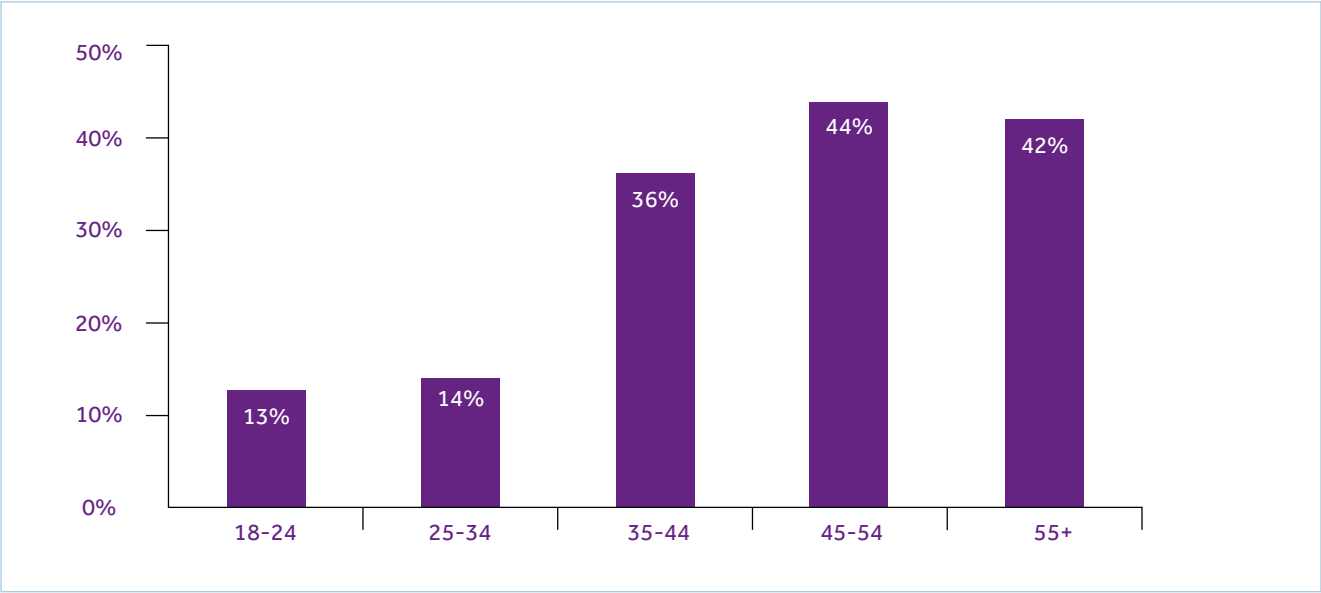


When it came to building a professional network outside the firm, our generations had different opinions. 89% of 45–54-year-olds and 82% of 55+ year olds, either strongly or somewhat agree that having an external professional network is essential for success, only 50% of 18–24-year-olds felt the same.

This could be because our younger cohort are yet to actually build a strong network compared with more experienced colleagues, but when taken into account with the lack of value placed on networking in figure six, could represent a shift in how younger professionals look to achieve career success.



Figure eleven: Do you think hybrid work has affected your visibility and internal relationship-building?



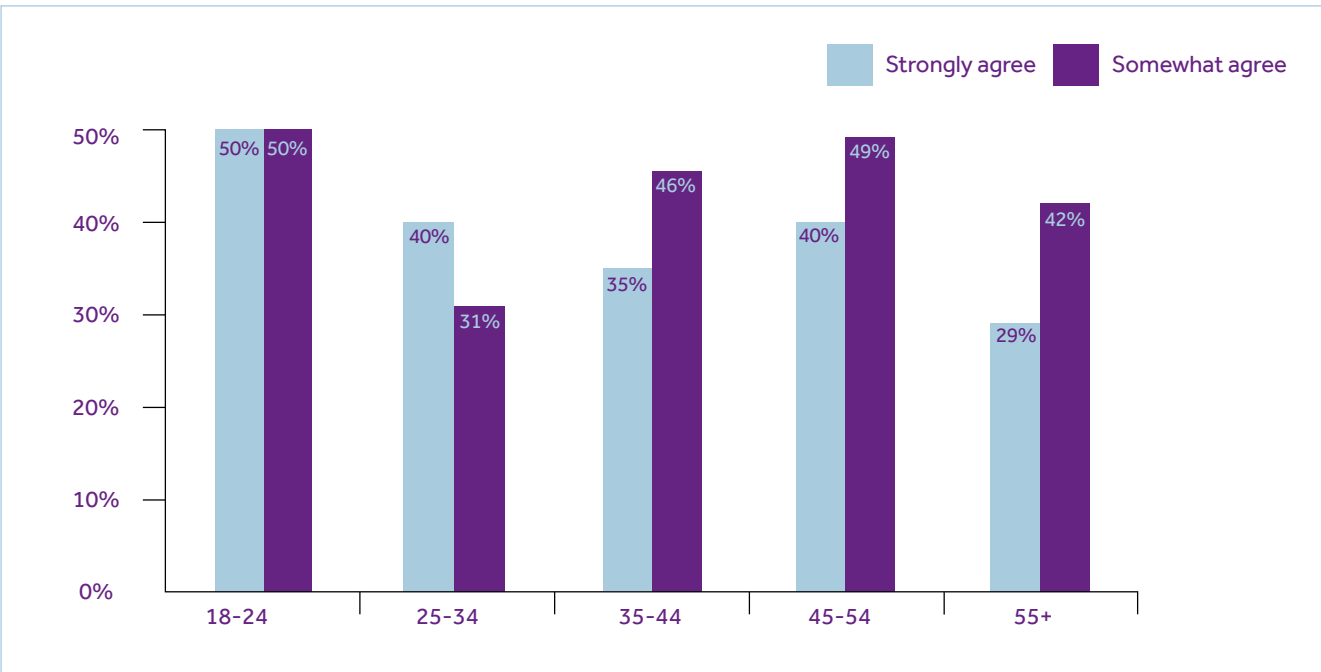
Our report has already shown how all generations value flexibility in their working patterns. However, with hybrid working comes compromises around how we build relationships.

Interestingly - and in line with how they view networking in general - only 13% of 18–24-year-olds and 14% of 25–34-year-olds believe hybrid working has affected their visibility and internal relationship building.

Perhaps hybrid working is the new normal for these generations – having been in place for most of their career to date - with the office a place for learning and development, rather than relationship building.

This is less of the case for our older workers, who still value that water cooler conversation. More than a third (36%) of 35–44-year-olds believe hybrid working has affected relationships, growing to 44% among the 45-54 cohort.

Figure twelve: I see long-term value in having a professional mentor (internally or externally)



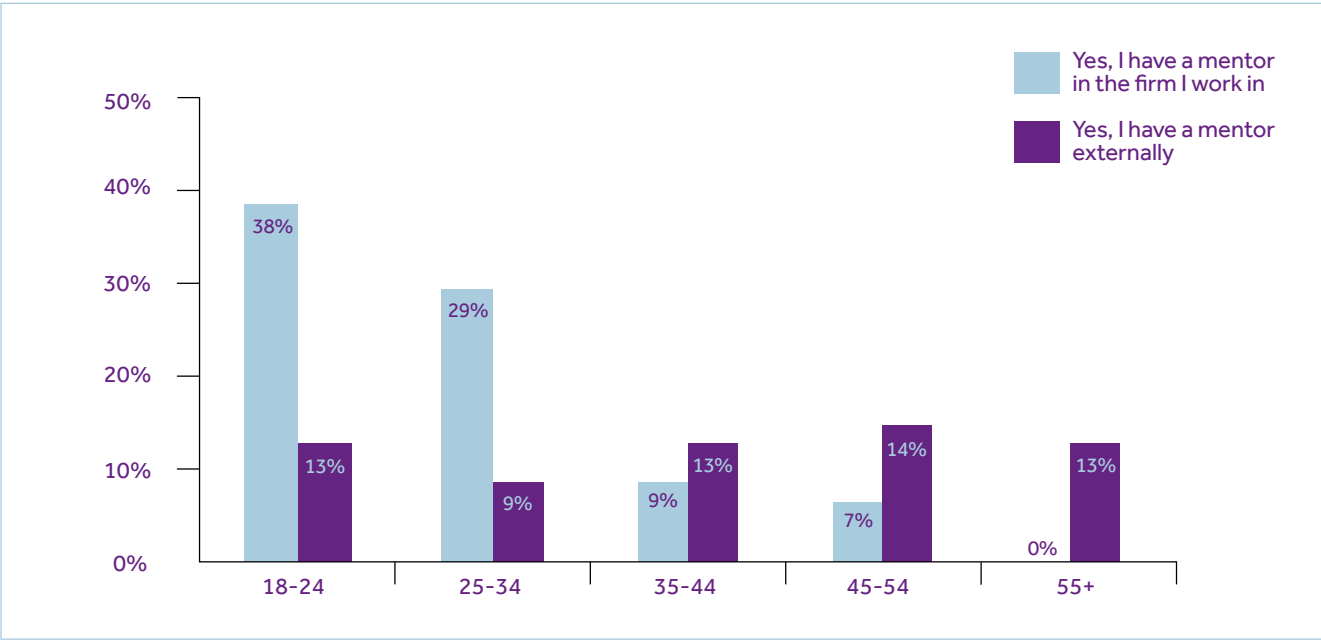
One way of building relationships across generations is through mentoring, whether peer-to-peer, external, or reverse. The majority of our cohorts see long-term value in professional mentoring, with 100% of our 18–24-year-olds strongly or somewhat agreeing with that sentiment.

Many are already involved in mentoring programmes, with figure thirteen showing that 38% of our 18–24-year-olds have a mentor at work and 13% have an external one.

38% of the 25–34 cohort also have a mentor (internally or externally), showing the long-term potential for such programmes.

Our 18–24-year-old cohort has largely worked in the hybrid era and consequently place less value on in-office networking and informal relationship building. Perhaps the more structured process of a mentorship programme is how they learn and network better. This is simply a different approach to how other generations see relationship building, with neither better nor worse than the other.

Figure thirteen: If you see long-term value in having a professional mentor, do you have a mentor?



Often, good workplace relationships start with effective leadership and emotionally intelligent management. Our survey asked respondents to choose the qualities they value most in the person they report to. Psychological safety is important to all generations, with clear communication (72%), accessibility and easiness to talk to (68%) and a transparent leadership style (63%) being the top three traits.

In general, younger workers value personal support, clear communication and objectives, accessibility and growth opportunities the most. This is in line with their greater need for support and training as they are at the start of their careers.



“I’m very conscious and aware of intergenerational differences in thinking and motivation, but feel a bit of afraid of how to bridge the gap and take the best from both.”

45–54 year-old

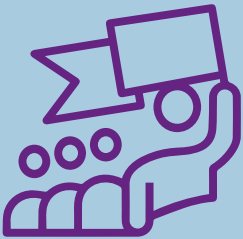
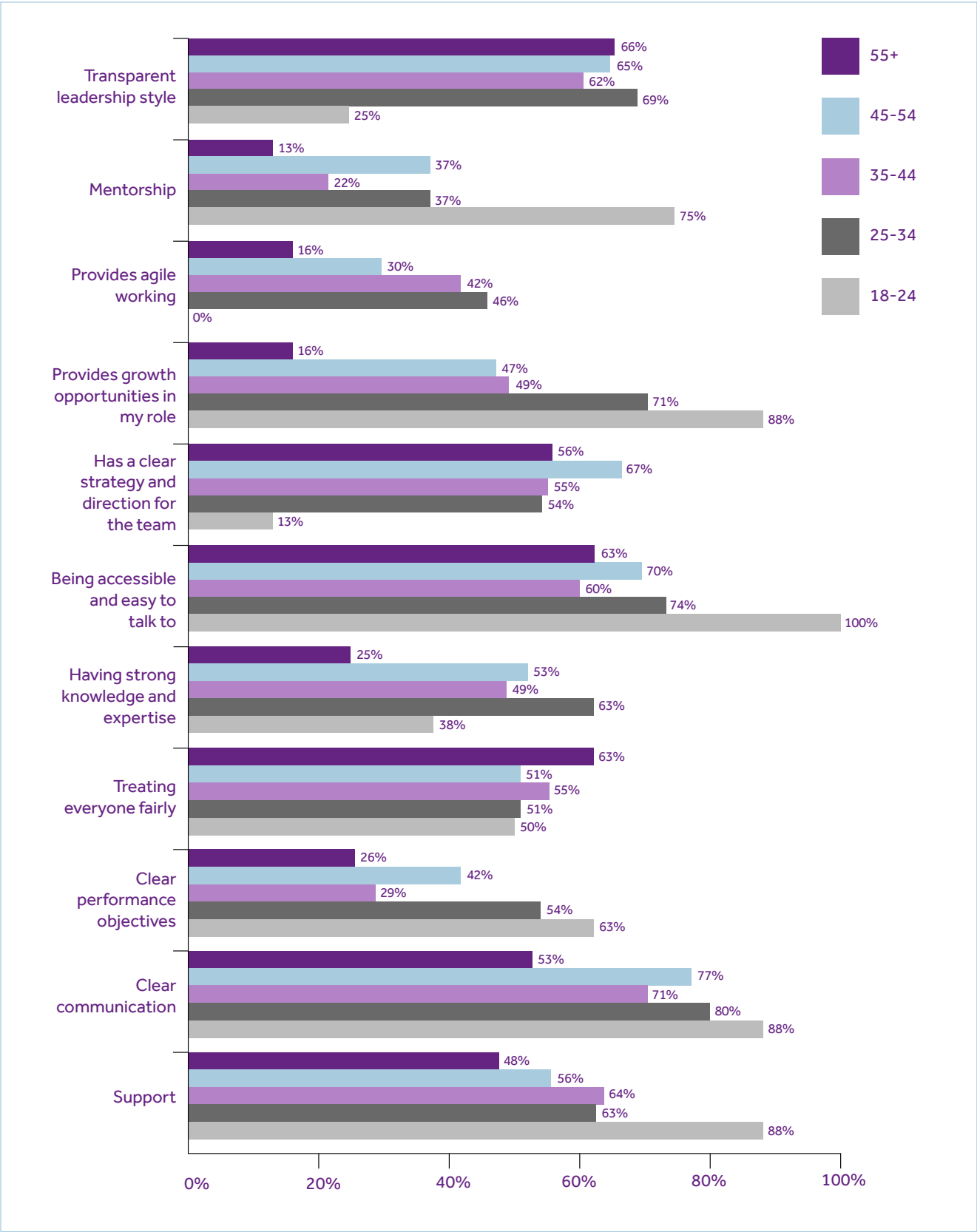


Figure fourteen: What qualities do you value most in the person you report to?



As we progress through the age groups, we see that skills and abilities like fairness, job specific expertise and leadership style become more important. This is likely due to the increased responsibility, complexity of work, and developing line management that workers take on as they move through their careers. Ultimately, all professionals want their manager to have their back. As one respondent commented: "A manager should give room for growth and autonomy, but protect you when things are tricky".

Conclusion

Understandably, there are some clear differences in how younger and older generations view work and what they expect from a job.

Those at the beginning of their careers have spent the majority of their working lives in hybrid working environments. Consequently, they value in-person networking and relationship building less, viewing office time as more for learning and development.

Those in the latter stages of their careers value flexibility above all else. Being more experienced, they understand how important resilience and adaptability are to career success. They also want to be autonomous, expecting leadership to let them get on with the work and not micromanage them.

While some respondents showed less tolerance and understanding towards those from a different generation, the overall trend was one of support, understanding and mutual respect – even if it isn't always clear to one generation what the other is thinking or why.

Ultimately, most employees desire a collaborative workplace where all viewpoints and ideas are considered, and where different generations can learn from each other. Fostering this in our firms is about communication, understanding and catering to different desires and motivations, and treating individuals with respect. Building this kind of culture isn't just good for morale – it's essential for performance, retention and innovation.

“Multi-generational relationships require flexibility and understanding from all sides. Like any team relationship, if one person is rigid in their way and has no desire to see things from another perspective, it becomes almost impossible to achieve success.”

35-44 year-old



Find out more:

To find out more about this report, or to discuss how Totum is examining multi-generational workforces further, please contact:

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